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FP Tech Desk Entrepreneur

Prince of Pop-up picks Canada to build the next Web

Love him or hate him, Brian Shuster helped create the Web we know today — and now he's building the next Web

Rick Spence

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Silicon Valley VCs turned him down, because they thought the Web was a fad that wouldn't last

Wonder why you've never heard of Shuster? He says it's his "invisibility cloak" — media tend to steer clear from covering business people who have been involved in porn. When he couldn't finance his activities through intellectual property or venture capital, Shuster and a partner created one of the Web's first pornography networks, Xpics Publishing, which later boasted two million paying members and revenue of \$10-million a month. Shuster avoided the tech meltdown by selling his hosting company, WebJump, for \$12-million in 1999. But his porn empire expired in 2000 after conflicts with

the U.S. Federal Trade Commission and credit-card companies over Xpics' practice of charging clients before their month-long free trials were up.

Hero or villain? History will judge Shuster on the success of Utherverse, the immersive new platform he's been developing since before moving to Canada in 2006. Between Utherverse and his IP holding company, Ideaflow, he employs 60 people in Vancouver and will soon receive his 90th patent.

If you are dreaming of moving to Silicon Valley, Shuster says Canada, and particularly Vancouver, is the place to change the world. He cites four reasons why:

- Silicon Valley knowledge workers use companies as transitional stepping stones. To recruit someone from another firm, you have to give them a better job title, he says. As soon as they get that title, he says, they update their resumés and start looking for another employer.
- The customer experience is better in Canada. Shuster says he has found a higher service ethic in his Vancouver workforce than in the U.S. "Here, people want to help," he says. "It seems to be a natural Canadian trait."
- High-tech talent is just as strong in British Columbia as in California, if not stronger. When it comes to 3D gaming, Shuster says, "the talent pool is the best in North America, and maybe the best in the world."
- Finally, he says, the Valley's get-rich-quick mentality impedes longer-term success. High-tech workers in California want to develop an app for a year and then sell out, he says; Canadians are more willing to tackle bigger projects. "If you want to change the world, you have to commit to it for a decade."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



Courtesy of Uthiverse

That's what Shuster is doing: Working on the future architecture of the Web. Today's "flat web," he says, is fine for search or e-commerce. His VWV (Virtual World Web) is immersive and interactive, with users moving through game-like virtual environments rather than reading static Web pages. With VWV, he says, the boundaries between gaming, education, shopping and social media will fade. Imagine online conventions with trade-show booths, panels, networking breaks and gift bags. Looking for a new home? There'll be no more 360-degree photo collages of the kitchen; you'll be a character in a 3D-style rendering, "walking" between rooms to experience the flow of the house.

Shuster says Uthiverse is business-friendly. More than 100,000 companies already have virtual presences on the VWV, and developers will find it easy to create 3-D games and applications. His current offerings include Virtual Vancouver, an immersive re-creation of the city for users to explore, as well as Red Light Center (RLC), a not-safe-for-work adult pleasure park based on Amsterdam's red-light district. In RLC, your customized character can chat, flirt, drink and dance with other people's avatars, or just head to a private room. Shuster says RLC has more than a million members, along with 10 paying "franchisees" that run RLC sites for other countries or cultures.

In February, Uthervse will release its third-generation VWW platform. Clients intending to leverage the technology already include a university, a major California real estate company, and a big online dating service. As the technology becomes more mainstream, Shuster says conventional browsers will be obsolete by 2015: “It’s inevitable that we will move toward a holodeck, like on Star Trek.”

While he doesn’t know if his platform will become the industry standard (other firms such as IBM and Google have worked on 3-D environments) he is confident Uthervse will become a big player in the new Web. Then maybe Shuster — and Canada — will get more respect.

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